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PROBLEMS AND PERILS OF BRITISH POLITICS.

BY GOLDWIN SMITH, D. C. L., LL. D.

THE present crisis in England has a special interest for Americans, as it has led in an unexpected way to a practical comparison of political experience between the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race, and made English statesmen for the first time turn their eyes to American institutions. The attempts which have been made to defend the concession of a separate parliament to Ireland by an appeal to the success of the federal system in the United States are obviously unavailing. The position of an American State in the Union, in which all the States have the same measure of local self-government and the same share in the government of the confederation, affords no precedent for the proposal to confer semi-independence on one portion of the United Kingdom. That such a notion should have been for a moment entertained only shows how ignorant of each other the two Anglo-Saxon communities have hitherto been. Instead of being an example of the successful application of home rule, in the Irish sense, the United States are a tremendous example of civil war brought on by the separatism of State-right ; while the practical prevalence of the national over the federal tendency has of late been a leading feature of American history. But what is at once surprising and important is the recourse of British Conservatives in quest of safeguards against revolutionary violence to the conservative elements of the American Constitution. Hitherto the American Republic has been the bugbear of the English Conservative, as was seen with disastrous effect in the sympathy shown by that party for the seceding South. Now British Conservatives are looking with wistful eyes to the American Senate, to the President's veto, to the Supreme Court, to the clause of the Constitution forbidding

legislation against the faith of contracts, and generally to the security against revolutionary change which the written Constitution affords.

Republican America is in fact more conservative than monarchical and aristocratic England. The reason is plain. The framers of the American Constitution looked democracy in the face. They did their best to organize it and to provide it with safeguards, though, being only wise men, not inspired prophets, they failed to foresee all the dangers, notably the danger of party, which Washington evidently regarded as an accidental and transient evil. But England has never looked democracy in the face, never attempted to organize it, or provided it with safeguards. English statesmen and Englishmen generally have floated on in the belief that, having sufficient safeguards in their hereditary monarchy and their aristocratic Upper House, they could afford to make the House of Commons as popular and democratic as they pleased. Meantime the House of Commons, thanks to its sole command of the purse and to the general triumph of democracy, has been becoming supreme, and has drawn to itself, not only the legislative power, but the virtual appointment of the executive. The monarchy has practically ceased to exist as a political force and dwindled to a social apex. Its legislative veto has not been exercised in any important case since William III. vetoed the Triennial Act, and its last exercise of authority in the appointment of the executive was the dismissal of the Whig Ministry by William IV. Nobody thinks it strange that in the midst of this dangerous crisis monarchy should be disporting itself in the pleasure haunts of Italy. The House of Lords has practically ceased to be, what in theory it is, a coördinate branch of the legislature in everything save the initiation of money bills. It now claims nothing more than a suspensive veto, the exercise of which is fiercely challenged by the democracy and met with threats of ending the House itself. The House of Commons, meanwhile, through successive extensions of the franchise, in which the two political parties have been bidding against each other, has been growing more and more democratic. The process is still going on. A new registration bill has been brought in by the Radical Government to give full effect to the ascendancy of numbers, strip property of its only remaining advantage, and thus snap the last link between representation and taxation. Payment

of members is apparently coming, and when it comes it will level about the only bulwark of a practical kind which conservatism retains. Already the majority of the House of Commons is not only radical, but revolutionary, and is doing the will of the wage-earning class, which, having got political power into its hands, is inclined to use it for the purpose of industrial and social change. Recent legislation by the House of Commons has been distinctly socialistic. The Eight-Hours Bill is an interference with the freedom of adult male labor, and with the contract between the adult male laborer and his employer. The Employers' Liability Bill also involved an abrogation of liberty of contract. The next measure, it seems, is to be a grant out of the taxes for pensions to aged laborers, which, by the avowal of its promoters, will be likely to entail an expense of a hundred millions of dollars a year—a different thing, be it observed, from a grant of army pensions, or any pensions, for a specific purpose; though all pension lists alike are liable to abuse when the pension agent gets to work. The party from which these measures emanate retains the name of Liberal; but in truth it is no longer Liberal, it is Socialistic. The only Liberals, in the old sense of the term, now remaining in England are the Hartingtonians, whose sentiments are practically identical with those of an American statesman.

The danger of a revolutionary change is enhanced in the case of Great Britain, by her being the centre of a world-wide empire. If a demagogic and revolutionary assembly, the creature of trade-unions and the Clan-na-Gael, could not be trusted with the destinies of its own community, much less could it be trusted with the destinies of colonies and dependencies scattered over the globe. The British rulers of India, with its subject population of two hundred and eighty millions, and with all its difficulties and perils, may well tremble at the thought.

To end the upper chamber or to strip it of all authority by leaving it a nominal existence, and thus to make the House of Commons the sole as well as the supreme power in the state, is the aim of the revolutionary party. To mend the upper chamber, make it again a co-ordinate branch of the legislature, like the American Senate, a real restraint on the excesses of a popular House, and a substantial barrier against revolution, is the aim of enlightened Conservatives. This is the great issue of the hour. Enlightened Conservatives see that this cannot be done without

divesting the House wholly or in part of its hereditary character ; that the hereditary principle, whatever may have been its function in an earlier stage of civilization, has done its work and had its day ; that while in the Middle Ages the lord had arduous duties, military, administrative, and judicial, to perform, and was thus saved from sybaritism, sybaritism is the inevitable tendency of the modern man of wealth and hereditary rank ; that the record of the House of Lords during the last two centuries will not bear examination, being simply the record of the resistance of a privileged order, and of the landed interest which that order represented, to all change, even to reform of the criminal law, the improvement of security for personal liberty, the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of the press. But what shall take the place of the hereditary principle, and on what line the House shall be reorganized, are problems not easy of solution. No constituencies for the election of a Senate present themselves like the States in the American Constitution. The mere injection of a certain number of life peers would by no means meet the exigencies of the case, and would in itself be an unpromising expedient, since the hereditary and life sections could scarcely fuse, and as often as the life members were outvoted by those whose only title to a share in legislation was their being "the sons of their fathers," popular clamor and a cry for the abolition of the hereditary element would ensue.

The idea of a nominative senate is condemned, not only by its unpopular character and the weakness which its want of popular basis would entail, but by decisive experience in the colonies, notably in Canada, where the nominative senate is a hopeless failure and the nominations are little better than an addition to the fund of corruption in the hands of a party government. A basis of the elective kind, as nearly equivalent to the States of the Union as Great Britain affords, seems to be supplied by the County Councils, newly instituted in place of the Quarter Sessions, composed of county magnates acting as justices of the peace ; by which the rural administration has hitherto been carried on, together with the councils of cities. To a House elected by these bodies it has been proposed to add a certain number of members appointed for special qualifications, such as having held high office or command, national or imperial, being the head of professions, or having done eminent service to the state. Such a house

might, it is thought, command rational allegiance and form a rallying point for reasonable resistance to revolution. It would not be likely to be reactionary, or to do more than give the deliberate opinion of the nation the ascendant over demagogic violence and gusts of popular passion. The bi-cameral system, compose your chambers as you will, has its inherent disadvantages : it is liable to deadlock, to the withdrawal of guidance and control from the popular chamber, and to the weakening of its sense of responsibility ; but the system is too deeply seated in England to be changed, especially when the nation is crossing a dangerous ford.

Supposing a scheme to be framed, the difficulty of getting it adopted is still great. There is a section of the House of Lords, unfortunately including the leader, which clings to hereditary privilege and will do all it can, openly or furtively, to stave off reform, a course in which it will be encouraged by the parting ray of popularity which has shone upon the House of Lords since their preservation of national unity by the rejection of Home Rule. These Tory opponents of reform have powerful though unnatural allies in the revolutionists of the House of Commons, who desire nothing so little as a reconstruction of the upper chamber, which would make it an effective curb, and who would easily find pretexts for wrecking the measure in its passage through their own House. It has been suggested that the House of Lords, were it so minded, might turn the flank of the resistance in the House of Commons by a resolution of self-reform, limiting the practice of sitting and voting to a select body of its members, while all would preserve their eligibility to the select body as well as their titles and their social rank. The House some time ago divested itself, by a formal resolution, of the invidious privilege of voting by proxy, while the lay members informally renounced their power of voting on legal appeals. This plan, however, would call for a good deal of self-sacrifice in a quarter where much self-sacrifice is not commonly found.

On the other hand the Radicals have no means of abolishing the House of Lords or docking it of its powers without its own consent, otherwise than by revolution. To constrain the Crown to swamp by new creations a majority of hundreds would be revolutionary, and, if it came to that, the next thing would be civil war.

The reorganization of the Upper House of Parliament at all events is the vital question of the hour. Upon its solution, not only the escape of the country from revolution, but the preservation of its unity depends. Since the surrender of the House of Commons to Irish disunion the House of Lords has become the guardian, not only of the Conservative institutions, but of the integrity of the nation.

It is not only the decadence of the hereditary principle that enforces a change in the constitution of the House of Lords. The power of the British aristocracy has rested not so much on the pedigrees, which in truth do not go back to the Norman conquest, as on the entailed estates. By an aristocracy and gentry of entailed estates England was in fact ruled entirely till 1832, when the Reform Bill admitted the commercial element to a share of power, and continued to be largely ruled down to the recent extension of the suffrage. But the rents of the entailed estates have now been fearfully reduced, and in some cases almost annihilated, by the fall in the price of wheat, which seems likely to continue, for the Argentine is now exporting, in addition to Russia, America, and Hindustan; while the wheat-growing area of Hindustan seems capable of indefinite extension and of being rendered more productive by construction of railways and improvement of implements, Hindu labor being at the same time extremely cheap. It seems hardly possible that the land in England should continue to maintain squire, farmer, and farm laborer. Many of the estates are moreover burdened with mortgages and with rent charges in favor of widows and younger children, which remain fixed while the rents decline. Mansions are being everywhere let by their impoverished owners, who retire to economize elsewhere, and in the palace of a noble family in Piccadilly dwells an American millionaire. Economical revolution, as usual, draws political and social revolution in its train. The weakness of a peerage without rents will soon be seen. The accidental coincidence of this economical catastrophe with the political and social crisis is a singular and momentous feature of the situation. The political enemies of the landed gentry of course grasp the opportunity of hastening and completing its fall. The new Parish Councils are the engines by means of which they hope, as they say, to disestablish the squire. They are using the taxing power for the same end. What rural England will be when the manorial and large-

farm system which forms its present organization is abolished Radicals, provided the political revolution is effected, are not very anxious to inquire.

Home Rule, as a popular movement, is almost dead. As a popular movement, indeed, apart from the agrarian agitation, it never had in it much life. What the Irish people wanted was, not political change, but the land. It was because they were persuaded that an Irish Parliament would give them the land that they shouted for the political change. Having got the land they care little for political change, and they could scarcely be lashed into showing the slightest resentment when the Home Rule Bill was thrown out by the House of Lords. They have contributed but sparingly to the Home Rule fund, while the hat has been sent round among their friends in the United States ; a symptom which is the more significant, as they are very generous by nature and usually give freely to any object near their hearts. All the agitations in Ireland for the repeal of the union, when not combined with agrarianism, have been utterly weak, O'Connell's agitation not less than the rest. But there are still the eighty Irish Nationalist members in the House of Commons bent on having a parliament, government, treasury, and patronage of their own, and these have the fate of the ministry in their hands. Nor is disunionism, or what the Germans would call "particularism," now confined to the case of Ireland. To get his Irish measure carried, its author appealed to provincial jealousies and antipathies all round, Scotch and Welsh as well as Irish. The spirits came at his call, and while other countries, formerly disunited, such as Germany and Italy, are now united, or moving in the direction of union, while in America herself nationality has been prevailing over federalism, Great Britain is suddenly threatened with dissolution into her primal elements. It is one thing to devolve the business of an overloaded parliament on local councils ; it is another to split up the realm into its original nationalities and undo the work of statesmen who have been laboring for ages to form a united nation. The first may be a necessary measure ; though the main reason why Parliament is overloaded is that it wastes its time in faction-fighting instead of doing its business. The second is manifest ruin. Yet to the dismemberment of the nation the madness of party is ready to resort, if it can win the game by no other means. Let other nations which

have given themselves over to the rule of party profit by the example.

All dangerous questions seem to have been brought to a head at once by the storm which the framer of the Irish Bill raised to put wind into the flapping sails of his Irish barque. The next fight, apparently, will be about the disestablishment of the Church in Wales, which Mr. Gladstone promised the Welsh on condition of their supporting his Irish policy. The author of "*The Church in Its Relation to the State*" may perhaps be congratulated on not having remained in office to face his former self upon this issue. Inured as he must be by this time to charges of inconsistency, and preternaturally gifted as he is with the faculty of explanation, his position would hardly have been pleasant, especially as he would have been brought into direct collision with all his High-Church friends, who, while they cared comparatively little for the established Church of Ireland, a strongly Protestant communion, will fight desperately for the established Church of Wales, in the fate of which they believe that of the whole English establishment to be involved. The established Church of Wales must go, though it is hardly, as some American journalists seem to think, worse than the Inquisition, the extermination of the Albigenses, or the massacre of St. Bartholomew. The established Church of Wales must go, and in time the established churches of England and Scotland will follow. Yet one could wish that so great a change as this must be in the spiritual organization and life of a nation could be made by hands more tender and reverential than those of infuriated politicians, and through some process calmer than a faction fight.

England of course shares the general unrest of the world. She shares the decay of the religious beliefs by which the social frame has hitherto been largely sustained and the perturbation which follows. She shares the failure of trust in a future life as the scene of compensation for poverty and suffering in this life, which has hitherto reconciled the less fortunate to their present lot. She shares the discontent which, when religion ceases to breathe contentment, is inevitably one of the first effects of popular education. She shares the prevalence, in the dim twilight of popular knowledge, of social chimeras and reveries of all kinds. She shares the unhappy effects of the sharp line of division between the employer and the wage-earner with the industrial

conflicts to which it gives rise. She shares the danger arising from the eagerness of the masses to use the political power of which they have become possessed for the purpose of transferring the property of the wealthier classes to themselves. Of the industrial disturbances and perils she has a particularly large share, owing to the great numbers of her wage-earners, the large proportion which her factory-hands, mechanics, and miners bear to her general population, their collection in inflammable masses, and their singular lack of national feeling; while the sensitiveness of her vast commercial system, partly made up of industries which are rather artificial and factitious than growths of her own soil, exposes her to catastrophes of no ordinary kind.

There is a general complaint of the deterioration of British statesmanship. One is always inclined to mistrust laudations of the past at the expense of the present, but it can hardly be doubted that in dignity at all events there has been a decline since the days of Pitt, Canning, and Peel. Extension of suffrage has brought with it the stump. Nor was it possible that statesmanship could escape the effects of a vast extension of the franchise, or the need of demagogic arts. This may be merely a stage in the political education of the people, as all the disturbances and perils of the time may be incidents of a period of fermentation from which the stream will one day run calm and clear. But at present it is difficult for any independent, lofty, and commanding figure to appear in the political field. Cavour and Bismarck were not the offspring of the caucus or the platform, but of high national endeavor and of the hour which would have the man.

Let evolution and the philosophy of history say what they will, much depends, especially at the great turning points, on personal action. If Mirabeau had not died, or Napoleon had died, events would have taken a widely different course. In England at this moment amidst all the confusion, uncertainty, and irresolution, with the gulf of revolution beginning to yawn, the appearance of anything like a commanding figure, especially one that rose above party, might turn the wavering scale. There are some men of high mark, but there can hardly be said to be a commanding figure on the scene.

Lord Salisbury owes the Conservative leadership in part to historic rank and princely wealth, but mainly to ability and character. He is a powerful though not a finished nor always,

it is commonly thought, an adroit or discreet speaker. Diplomacy is his line ; he prefers it, as aristocratic statesmen often do, to domestic politics. Of domestic politics he has not made a serious study, nor is there anything to show that he grasps and is prepared to deal with the situation. His leisure is understood to be spent, not in working out political problems, but in chemistry, in which he is an adept. In regard to home politics he shows something of aristocratic indolence and nonchalance ; nor can desperate effort or the readiness to run risks for which a great crisis may call be naturally expected of a grandee. In 1886 Lord Salisbury, raised to power at a most critical juncture, with a majority of a hundred in the House of Commons, instead of grappling with the question of the hour and trying to redress the balance of the constitution, retired into the Foreign Office and allowed the fruits of Unionist victory to be lost. His one fixed aim appears to be the retention of an hereditary House of Lords, not that he is actuated by any narrow or selfish spirit of caste, but he regards hereditary aristocracy as the heaven-appointed antidote to democratic excess and baseness. He even goes so far in his efforts to stave off reform from the House of Lords as to appeal to the jealousy of the revolutionary party in the House of Commons. He also clings to Church establishment, to which his allies, the Liberal-Unionists, do not cling, though they wish the question to be treated with tenderness and moderation. It is unfortunate that, being set to stem revolution in the interest of gradual and rational progress, he happens to concentrate upon himself all the popular feeling against caste. He is, moreover, in the wrong House. The Conservative party is proud, and has reason to be proud, of its leader ; but fatal experience seems to have shown that it is not skilfully led.

In Mr. Balfour there is a union of practical vigor and courage with sensibility and culture, which never fails to interest, and which has impressed not only American lookers-on, but the people of Ireland, by whom, when he visited their island, the Unionist secretary was remarkably well received. In debate he is very prompt and effective, and no fault has been found with his leadership of the opposition. Why he is not exactly a commanding figure, or more generally regarded as the destined deliverer of the country from its perils, it is difficult to say. Perhaps he is rather too much of a tactician. His opposition to the

Home Rule Bill was distinctly tactical. It failed to make a broad impression on the national mind, such as would have been made by a great national statesman of the old school, and all the tactical skill was not crowned with a single victory in Committee. Strategy based on the hope of divisions in the enemy's camp is always weak ; sections may quarrel among themselves, but, at the decisive point, they all prefer the frying-pan to the fire. Mr. Balfour shows a weak spot when, to capture votes, he flirts with bimetallism and woman suffrage.

The Duke of Devonshire, better known by his former title of Lord Hartington, was in his youth regarded as a loungeur and a man of pleasure. He was in public life as the heir of a great Whig house, but was supposed to consider it a bore. Comic stories embodying that belief were current. His high rank and vast wealth left scarcely an object to which his ambition could aspire. If in 1875, when Mr. Gladstone for a moment threw up the cards, he was made provisional leader of the opposition in Mr. Gladstone's place, it was mainly because he could with more grace than one of the older men give way to the real leader when it pleased the real leader to return. But when the unity of the nation was in peril by the secession of Mr. Gladstone to Home Rule, Lord Hartington nobly responded to the call of duty. And he has ever since lived laborious days, days which must be doubly laborious to an unambitious and pleasure-loving man. As a speaker he is content to talk good sense, without pretence to eloquence, though with dignity and effect. The confidence which his character inspires is perhaps the nearest thing to a hold upon the entire nation possessed by any of the leaders. Like Lord Salisbury he is now in the wrong House, though his presence in it adds to its strength at a critical juncture.

Nothing in these events is more striking than the force shown by Mr. Chamberlain in holding Birmingham, with all its democracy, fast to the Union cause. His speeches of late, both in Parliament and out of it, have been most effective. He is unquestionably a man of real mark and must play a leading part in whatever is to come. To call him a turncoat and a wandering rhetorician, as Lord Rosebery does, would be absurd. The ground of quarrel between him and Lord Rosebery's party is that on the great question of the day he refused to turn his coat. It is true

that some of the socialistic utterances of his early days, however, still embarrass him. It is true also that he has been regarded rather as a municipal than a national politician. On the other hand, he is free from the indolence, the timidity, and the formal embarrassments of the *grandée*. He could dare and risk something for the country.

That social feeling still goes for something is apparent when a party which is shouting for the abolition of the House of Lords finds itself constrained to accept as its leader a lord who has never been in the House of Commons, and who has less of a record than any prime minister since the beginning of this century. Mr. Gladstone himself, on whose recommendation his successor was chosen, has, amidst all his political developments, preserved his feeling of traditional reverence for the aristocracy and the Court. A greater contrast there could hardly be between two leaders of the same party than that between Mr. Gladstone and his successor, the first appealing to the religious public by defences of Mosaic cosmogony, the second appealing to the sporting public as the winner of the Derby. Lowell used to say of Mr. Gladstone that he had a unique power of improvising lifelong convictions; his convictions, however, when improvised, were intense. His successor seldom speaks without confirming the general belief that he is a politician of the sporting order, and is running for the political Derby. He may be said almost to avow himself an Opportunist. He tells you that he sees nothing wrong in the established Church, and that he is ready on demand to pull it down; that he is a second-chamber man, and ready on demand to abolish or reduce to impotence the house of Lords; that he considers the consent of England indispensable to the alteration of the compact of union, and that he is ready, if he can get a large majority, to alter it without her consent. One day he is visibly angling for the support of the Liberal-Unionists. Finding they do not bite, he next day makes a thorough-going Home Rule speech. Mr. Gladstone has always been opposed to aggrandisement and to military expenditure. Lord Rosebery owes his popularity largely to his reputation for Imperialism, with which he combines a pledge to dismember the nation which is the heart of the Empire. Lord Rosebery's opponents all acknowledge his great address, his singular charm of manner, his unfailing readiness and liveliness of speech. His comparative youth, for he is only

forty-five, invests him with a certain glamour, and his eminence on the turf, while it helps him with the sporting class, is not likely to do him much harm with the Non-Conformist conscience, now more political than religious. He has the very considerable advantage of a perfectly open choice among all the principles, policies, and courses which may seem conducive to the maintenance of his party in power. The only cloud on his horizon is the probability that a point will be reached at which the grand seigneur and the social radical will part.

So rapidly is the scene shifting that forecast is hardly possible, even for those upon the spot. To attempt to define the situation is like shooting at a running deer. The strategy of the government, which it calls statesmanship, is directed to two objects: the invention of a profitable quarrel with the House of Lords, and the dissolution of the alliance between the Conservative and Liberal wings of the Unionist party. To attain the first object measures are brought in, such as the Employers' Liability Bill and the Eight-Hours Bill, which the Lords are likely to reject, and the rejection of which may embroil them with the trade-unions. For the attainment of the second object Home Rule, which unites the two wings of the Unionist party, is kept in the background, as far as the necessity of retaining Irish support will permit, and questions which divide the Unionists, such as Welsh Disestablishment, are brought to the front. After all, the event will very likely be decided, not by any one of the great issues, much less by a general judgment on national policy as a whole, which far transcends the mental power of the masses, but by the last thing which has happened before the election, if it is of a kind to interest or stir the people. It is believed that on the last occasion some of the metropolitan elections were turned by popular indignation at the arrest of a respectable woman as a street-walker, through a mistake of the police. "Go, my, son and see with how little wisdom the world is governed." The well-known words of Oxenstierna are hardly less applicable to popular than to royal government.

If any American is enough of an Anglophobist to wish to see misfortune befall the cradle of his race, it is not unlikely that his wish may be fulfilled. Still there is force in old England, if the man can be found to call it forth.

GOLDWIN SMITH.